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Assessment in a Globalized Economy: A Task-based Approach to Assess the Proficiency of Dutch in Specific Occupational Domains

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Abstract: For language tests to be in tune with the target context, a constant attention to the shifting characteristics of real-world language use is required. This holds particularly true for language tests in the occupational domain since domestic labor market demands are continuously changing and increasingly met through the recruitment of foreign workers. This paper describes how subject experts were involved in the cyclical validation process of a test of Dutch for the professional domain. A survey of recruitment agents, employers, policy makers, language instructors, examiners, and former test takers indicated that a task-based test targeting the language skills involved in service-oriented work settings such as administration and health care at level B2 of the CEFR was favored. The involvement of subject specialists recruited among the test's various stakeholders proved to be of vital importance throughout the development and validation process to ensure content validity and avoid biases.

1 Introduction

Tests of language for specific purposes (LSP) assess context-specific language performance (Douglas, 2001). The methods and material of LSP tests therefore need to be informed by an analysis of the target language use situations (Douglas, 2000). This poses a particular challenge for developers of occupational language tests since in a globalized economy the formal and informal language requirements for successfully navigating the workplace are subject to constant change. Adapting tests to these changes is a constant concern for test makers as they seek to ensure the validity of their tests. In order to include the relevant content knowledge in the resulting test a strong collaboration with stakeholders is required throughout its development (ALTE, forthcoming). This paper describes how stakeholders were involved in the development of a test of Dutch for the professional domain (PROF) by the Certificate Dutch as a Foreign Language (CNaVT, www.cnavt.org) and the particular challenges it posed.

2 Background

The CNaVT is a project of the Dutch Language Union, an intergovernmental organization that promotes the learning and use of the Dutch language across the globe (www.taalunie.org). Dutch and Belgian employees based at the Centre for Language and Education (KU Leuven, Belgium) collaborate with specialists and organizations in both the Netherlands and Belgium to develop task-based (Van Gorp & Deygers, 2013) and domain-specific (Gysen & van Avermaet, 2005) exams of Dutch as a foreign language. All exams are related to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and are especially developed for higher educated (young) adults who want to prove their proficiency in Dutch as a foreign language with an internationally recognized certificate. The paper-based CNaVT exams typically test the key language skills in an integrated manner (Cumming, 2013) where appropriate (i.e., more integrated testing at higher levels of language proficiency).

In this paper we will focus on PROF, a broad LSP test targeted at the general professional domain (as opposed to narrow LSP tests targeting specific occupations; ALTE, forthcoming). This test was recently renewed, giving the CEFR a more central role in the design of the construct, the task specifications, and the rating model. As part of a cyclical test validation process, the target audience and their needs were also surveyed. In Dutch speaking companies in Belgium and the Netherlands approximately 80 percent of the daily communication is done in Dutch (van der Meulen et al., 2016), but there are few official regulations regarding the language skills required to work in settings where Dutch is the main language of communication (we are only aware of the B2 requirement for doctors, dentists, pharmacists, psychotherapists, and health care psychologists to become accredited in the Netherlands). From the onset it was therefore clear that subject experts were to be involved to get a better understanding of what the test was supposed to assess.

3 Test development

3.1 Involvement of subject experts

Both the CNaVT test developers and the CNaVT advisory board, made up of assessment experts and teachers of Dutch as a foreign language, were involved throughout the development process of PROF.

Subject experts were recruited from among the different stakeholders at the start of the development process. An invitation for help was extended to a large number of stakeholders, who were also asked for referrals to other relevant actors in the field.

- (1) Private recruiters and international mobility managers of the Dutch and Belgian public employment services were contacted since they are familiar with the national labor market demands and therefore ideally placed to identify the jobs foreign people are recruited for.
- (2) Domestic employers, language policy makers, and teachers of Dutch as a foreign and/or second language were contacted for the same reason.
- (3) CNaVT examiners from all over the globe were involved to help identify foreign companies where employees need to be proficient in Dutch.
- (4) Finally, test takers who had passed the former LSP test and were working in jobs that require Dutch, were contacted to get a better insight into the language use and language tasks they were actually performing in Dutch.

3.2 Needs analysis

A needs analysis was carried out among the convenience sample consisting of recruitment agents, employers, policy makers, language instructors, examiners, and former test takers. The stakeholders were surveyed about the profile of the working professionals who could benefit from a test of Dutch for the professional domain, the domains and topics appropriate to include in the test, and the required language skills and performance standards.

The subject specialists who helped us to determine the target audience and their language needs confirmed that the occupations targeted in the original test were still very relevant in 2017. That is, they indicated that future test takers were likely to end up working in administrative and/or service oriented jobs, of the kind found in banks, embassies, call centers, and (international) companies dedicated to export or import. A new finding was that recruiters in the Netherlands and Belgium are increasingly turning abroad for jobs in health care, recruiting mainly foreign dentists (Netherlands) and nurses (Belgium).

The initial findings from the needs analysis were subsequently confirmed by a purposive sample comprised of subject experts from the identified occupation domains (including health care professionals such as nurses, care givers, and directors of hospitals and assisted-living centers) and by an independent literature review (e.g., van der Meulen et al., 2016).

3.3 Test and task construction

Based on the findings of the needs analysis, the test's original target group was extended to include people working in health care in addition to administrative/service oriented professionals. A purposive sample of subject experts from these domains was put together to aid in the development of the test construct and the ensuing tasks (ALTE, forthcoming; Douglas, 2000). The purposive sample was consulted throughout the development of the test construct and the ensuing tasks. They provided feedback on the relevance and authenticity of the solicited communicative acts, on the tasks' ability to establish whether a test taker masters the necessary language skills to a sufficient degree, and on the susceptibility of the test construct and tasks to cultural biases.

The subject experts favored authentic real-life tasks for the test, but also demanded the tasks not be overly specific so as not to exclude potential test takers (see Brunfaut, 2014, for a discussion of practicality vs. specificity). They indicated that the B2 level was a minimum requirement for these occupational profiles, but hastened to add that generally speaking, foreign employees do not meet this requirement when they are recruited. The subject experts therefore intended to administer the test to employees who had worked and lived in a Dutch environment for a while, as an incentive for them to learn the language or to decide about extending or improving their contract.

CEFR experts, who were particularly familiar with the B2 level and/or the occupation domain, judged the level of the resulting tasks and set an appropriate standard. It proved difficult to include the purposive sample of experts in these stages since many of them were not familiar with the CEFR.

3.4 Piloting

Because they were involved early on in the development process, a number of language schools, institutions offering Dutch for occupational purposes, and employers such as hospitals were willing to engage in structural partnerships for piloting purposes. Examiners and pilot test

takers at these organizations conveyed their ideas about the relevance, authenticity, and difficulty of the test tasks in interviews with the test developers.

It is common procedure to have test takers and examiners provide feedback on the CNaVT test they took/administered. Their feedback will be analyzed together with the final test results and taken into account while developing future instantiations of the test.

3.5 Challenges

Working closely together with subject specialists was a prerequisite for the development of a valid test of Dutch for the professional domain, but not without challenges:

- (1) We found that many practitioners in the field were not familiar with the CEFR or entertained very different interpretations of the framework than the professional test developers involved.
- (2) The absence of official guidelines on Dutch at the workplace made it difficult to convince stakeholders that using a standardized test related to the CEFR has an added value compared to their own (often idiosyncratic) assessment practices.
- (3) The demands imposed on the subject experts are quite high, while there is little immediate return for them. There is no guarantee that their investment will pay off in the long term as the requirements in the job market can be quite volatile and what is a requirement now, needn't be a requirement in the not so distant future. This made it difficult to find subject experts who were willing to engage in the development process.

4 The resulting test

PROF is a paper-based test of Dutch in the occupational domain developed for learners of Dutch as a foreign language who want to use Dutch in an occupational context, more specifically in health care or administrative services. The test assesses the key language skills involved in varying work settings that are highly service oriented (e.g., customer service, reception, purchasing department, residential care center, hospital) at level B2 of the CEFR. Communication partners can be unknown (customers, new suppliers, etc.) or familiar (colleagues, patients, known suppliers, etc.). There is no subject-specific knowledge of vocabulary required and test takers are allowed to use a dictionary.

The test consists of three parts with two task-based and highly integrated tasks each. The task introductions have a motivational and clarifying character, and are designed to elicit a well determined response from the test taker. They describe the working environment the test taker finds herself in, her role in this environment, and the nature of her task. The introduction is followed by the instructions, which elaborate the task requirements and guide the test taker to a semi-authentic spoken (Part 1) or written input (Parts 2 and 3).

Task types are:

- (1) Part 1: writing a text, based on informative or argumentative spoken input, eventually adding an argumentative part;
- (2) Part 2: writing a text, based on informative or argumentative written input, eventually adding an argumentative part;
- (3) Part 3: holding a formal or informal plea, based on a very short informative input.

The difference between the first and second task type lies in the nature of the input: the former always has spoken input (a monologue such as a voicemail or short lecture, or a dialogue such as an interview), the latter always has written input (all kind of articles, or a part of a document such as a contract, safety regulations, a brochure about a product, service, or workshop, etc.).

Examples of the output for the first and second task type are writing an e-mail to a superior to convince her to introduce a new regulation or ask for a leave, writing an e-mail to a client to communicate a decision, providing clarification about a product, or writing a note to a colleague about something that happened during the time she was absent.

As a response to the third task type, the test taker could be asked to hold a small presentation about a workshop she attended, to introduce a new colleague to the company, or to perform a job interview. The input for this task type can be varied, but is always a short written text (part of an article found in a newspaper or popular scientific magazine, a brochure of a center for adult education, a company's website, etc.).

5 Conclusion

For language tests to be in tune with the target context, a constant attention to the shifting characteristics of real-world language use is required. This might be particularly true for language tests in the occupational domain. Given that there are few official requirements for Dutch language proficiency in the workplace and the labor market demands are quite volatile, a high level of involvement of subject experts was necessary to develop a test of Dutch for the professional domain. This paper describes how subject experts were involved in the various stages of the development process: the needs analyses, test and task construction phase, piloting, relating the test to the CEFR, and the standard setting. While their involvement proved worthwhile and even necessary to demarcate the target group and their needs, to ensure validity, and avoid biases, the collaboration also proved difficult at times because of their unfamiliarity with and/or skepticism towards standardized tests that are related to the CEFR.

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